

# **Uncovering African Agency: The Media, Civil Society Organizations, and Sino-Ghana Relations**

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## **Introduction**

The perception of Sino-Africa engagement is multifaceted in nature – to some, it undercuts global attempts to enhance transparency and good governance, to others, it is “imperialist” or “neo-colonial” (Sun 2014). The perception of the relationship as virtuous is done not on the basis of agency, but that it is devoid of the dependency model. Agency in the context of this study is the capacity of governments, international institutions, civil societies, and individual players to exercise influence over foreign entities to maximize value and achieve a set of goals (Coffie and Tiky 2021). “A person or thing that wields power or achieves a particular goal is referred to as an agent” (Nunoo & Adu-Boateng 2022, 401).

Ghana and China have had positive diplomatic and economic relations. In the post-independence era, the two countries’ relations have progressed beyond political ideology to include economic cooperation (Aidoo 2016). In Ghana, non-state actors (NSAs) such as civil society groups, local communities, individuals, and the media often accuse China of unfair competition that potentially disrupts local businesses and the national economy as a whole. The role and influence of NSAs in Sino-African relations have been largely overlooked and underexplored.

This study investigates the “China in Africa” debate. It attempts to answer the question: “To what extent do civil society organizations, the media and local groupings exert agency in Sino-Ghana relations?”

## **Methodology**

The study employed the mixed method approach. Data were gathered from policy documents, in-depth interviews with relevant academics, actors from the business community (especially Ghana Union of Traders Association (GUTA), Ghana National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (GNCCI), civil society organizations (CSOs, including nongovernmental organizations) and opinion leaders from the various communities in Ghana as well as books, journal articles, newspapers and internet sources. The study explored a host of issues on China-Ghana relations and focused on a detailed analysis of two cases (in Ghana) to establish both elements of agency and actors involved in exerting such agency. These cases were selected because they were characterized by legal, diplomatic, and international attention as well as national outcry. The study used 12 respondents in all. A qualitative study only needs five to twenty-five (5 - 25) (Creswell, 2012). Similar observations made by Kuzel (1992) suggest six to eight and/or twelve to twenty. The thematic and descriptive analytical methods were employed for analysis and presentation of the results.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***The Bui Dam Construction and Ghanaian laborers***

The African Labour Research Network (ALRN) and the Labour Research and Policy Institute (LRPI) of the Trades Union Congress (Ghana) voiced their worries regarding Sinohydro Company's labor situations at the Bui Dam site in their 2009 report.

Sinohydro employed the majority of Ghanaian workers on a contract basis and without any formal legal contracts. As a result, job security was non-existent, and benefits were minimal. Threats and victimization were employed by the Chinese employers as anti-union strategies. Sinohydro's conduct was clearly against the Ghanaian Constitution and other laws. According to Section 24 (3) of the Ghanaian Constitution, “every worker has the right to create or join a trade union of his choice for the promotion of his economic and social interests.” Furthermore, workers have the right to create or join unions under Section 70 (1) of the Labor Act (Act 651).

Labor disputes arose frequently owing to the project's lack of regard for employees' rights, garnering significantly more media attention than the project's economic value. The media championed this cause by giving airtime to the aggrieved workers to share their frustrations.

Workers at the Bui Dam site in Ghana began pushing for the ability to organize a union in the middle of 2008. Two public protests were held by the workers. The first protest was held in response to Chinese management's claimed indifference to the fate of three employees who drowned in the river where the dam was being constructed. The second protest was in response to an unjust and discriminatory increase in wages for mechanics (Baah et al., 2009).

The Ghana Trade Union Congress (TUC) and the Bui Power Authority (BPA) both came out in support of the workers. Finally, the BPA requested that Sinohydro management allow the workers to organize a union.

The demands and efforts of the laborers led to the formation of a union in 2009, which is linked with the TUC's Construction and Building Materials Workers Union (CBMWU). Sinohydro and the CBMW signed a Collective Agreement (Ampratwum et al. 2013, cited in Odoom 2016). As noted by Participant 10, “this was a clear example where Ghanaian workers and their Unions challenged their Chinese management or employers – and it’s a big thing (October 15, 2023)”

Communications involving dismissals, warnings, and contract abrogation are copied to TUC representatives and posted on the site information board. Later, peace was forestalled between the workers and the management.

### ***Chinese Involvement in “Galamsey” and Resistance from Non-State Actors***

Anti-galamsey actions by the Ghanaian government began in 2013 in response to the mounting public pressure on the government to address the widespread involvement of Chinese migrants in "galamsey" (that is, illegal mining) operations (Aidoo 2016). On July 20, 2012, the Manso-Nsiena youth staged a large demonstration (Odoom 2019). In the Manso-Nsiena area, there were about six separate groups of illegal Chinese miners operating (Ibid). The Chinese and the youth exchanged gun shots. The situation was dramatic, but armed police officers from a neighboring town helped to calm the situation (Ibid, 15).

The demonstration was covered by the media, the messages of the protest, and the resulting shaky security in the area spread throughout Ghana. Ghanaians were angered and agitated by the harm caused by illegal mining upon a video footage of the incident and the magnitude of

environmental damage made public. President John Mahama eventually formed an “Inter-Ministerial Task Force on Illegal Mining” in May 2013 after a long period of mounting public pressure. The task force's mandate was to “seize all the equipment the illegal miners use,” apprehend and sue culprits, both Ghanaians and non-Ghanaians (Odoom 2019: 216).

Campaigns like #StopGalamsey, which was spearheaded by Citi FM, an Accra-based radio station gathered a large media coalition of support from various “local media outlets,” resulting in a lengthy petition with signatures from major national leaders “both past and present,” which was handed to Parliament on April 7, 2017 by officials from City FM (Gavin 2017). “Life is more precious than gold,” “Help End Galamsey now,” “Stop unlawful mining,” “Preserve our Water Bodies,” and “Preserve our Rich Forests,” among other headlines, were used by #StopGalamsey to draw attention to “galamsey’s” insidious nature. Prominent officials from the Christian Council of Ghana and other media houses also signed the #StopGalamsey Campaign (Gavin 2017).

In addition, Ghanaian CSOs, for example, Occupy Ghana chastised the government for failing to handle adequately, Chinese Aisha Huang (also known as the Queen of Galamsey). “When Aisha Huang was first arrested, she was charged with some absurd, risible, and insignificant administrative infractions of immigration restrictions,” (Joynews 2019). It took a demonstration and a petition on 16th May, 2017 by OccupyGhana for her to be charged with, (as some believe), the right offenses under the Minerals and Mining Act, which imposes severe penalties for illicit mining. However, the lawsuit was dropped, and deportation was considered. Pressure from the media, CSOs, and advocacy groups compelled the President to recognize that dropping the case was a mistake (Zurek 2019).

Reacting to the endeavors undertaken by the NSAs, Participant 3 states that “the media is doing a good job; we've seen several documentaries from joy FM and their sister organization[s].” Other participants concurred with this assertion, underscoring that, to a significant extent, the media effectively serve as a catalyst in alerting the government and the general populace to the illicit conduct of Chinese nationals in Ghana. In this context, Participant 4 advances that “the media has [sic] been playing a major role in exposing the activities of the Chinese. In fact, I dare say that they are the most effective.”

Nevertheless, some participants voiced their dissatisfaction regarding the efficacy of community members and civil society organizations (CSOs). Participant 4 divulge that “just like the local communities, the CSOs, I see them as more of a press conference organizers. They organize press conferences, they speak about it and nothing happens... but some are doing very well”. Participants 3, 4, 5 and 13 also express concerns about local residents collaborating with Chinese individuals to conceal the environmental damage inflicted upon mining communities. Participant 3 indicates that:

Unfortunately, I don't think local communities play a role in exposing them. I think local communities actually aid them because like the former Chinese ambassador said ..., the Chinese nationals do not know our villages, they don't know where the *galamsey* is done, where we have gold in Ghana... it is the Ghanaians who show them there... the community members work for them in those mines and they don't expose them enough. Because they protect them, that's why they are able to carry out their nefarious activities (August 29, 2023).

The statement above suggests that, although local residents occasionally bring to light Chinese illegal activities within the mining industry, more often than not, some collaborate with the Chinese in causing environmental harm under the pretext of mining.

### ***Regime Theory and Ghana -China Relations - Discussion***

According to Bradford (2007), regime theory (RT) recognizes the media, civic groups, or individuals as regimes that direct and regulate or serve as a third eye in monitoring interstate engagements (thus, Ghana-China ties) to ensure that Ghanaian laws and sovereignty are not abridged. While China helps Ghana with infrastructural, economic, and essential development, Ghana reciprocates this by aiding China with minerals and other natural resources for China's industrial development. This cements the win-win policy espoused in Sino-African relations (Hanauer and Morris 2014). Also, it is consistent with RT, which holds that states frequently share mutual interests and collaborate to achieve common goals (Bradford 2007).

On the contrary, participants maintain the belief that while the relationship between Ghana and China is mutually beneficial, it lacks balance. This is due to China leveraging its powerful position in international affairs to exploit the vulnerable institutions in Ghana and, by extension, Africa. A participant indicates that:

The relationship between China and Ghana for example, is mutual but not balanced in the sense that if you look at China's GDP, economic power, China's international power, compared to Ghana, Ghana is only 10% of China's global power. So, for China to sign let's say two billion infrastructure agreement with Ghana, it's just like Ghana signing an agreement with a city in China. (Participant 1, October 15, 2022).

The public's outrage and disappointment, along with the widespread recognition and courageous mobilization of Ghanaian youth to expose Chinese illegal activities in the country's mining industry and other sectors, are in accordance with the tenets of RT. For example, protests from civil groups compelled the state agency to organize public and door-to-door education on the benefits of mining in the Atewa forest for the nation as part of the Sinohydro deal and also assured the public of ethical considerations and environmental preservation. Participant 6 expresses that:

Civil societies such as A Rocha Ghana have been a consistent voice when the issue of Atewa came up. They should be given credit for holding the government on the issue of Atewa and the Sinohydro deal... the civil society groups and the citizenry are doing

well in exposing the activities of the Chinese for the government to act (September, 2023).

Thus, state agencies have been encouraged to intervene in similar scenarios involving youth protests against Chinese illegal mining activities to shape relations between the two countries. Because the youth and civil society groups are a part of the regime that shapes and regulates state behavior, they protested against the Chinese to safeguard the environment.

The abuse of workers' rights in the instance of the Bui Dam construction and Ghanaian laborers, sparked a protest against the Chinese Shanghai Company's management. According to RT, the state is seen as the building block of regimes, hence the aggrieved workers and the media staged a protest to draw the attention of the relevant state agencies to resolve their problems. Also, regimes facilitate relations between states and other potential actors by decreasing the chaos that would otherwise reign in international affairs (Bradford 2007). Consequently, the TUC intervened to assist the actors in cooperating to reduce tensions between the employees and the company's management. Similarly, GUTA exerted pressure on the government of Ghana to pursue legal action against the Chinese in the informal trading sector. In 1994, the Ghana Investment Promotion Council (GIPC) Act 478 became a law. Because of the constant pressure from GUTA and other CSOs, this Act was later updated by an Act of Parliament (2013). A task force comprising officials from Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT), GUTA, Registrar General's Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and GIPC was formed. Its mandate was to ensure compliance to the law and to address any emergent difficulties, such as tax evasion and non-compliance with immigration restrictions (Odoom 2016). Following weeks of education and “crackdown”, some illegal non-Ghanaian-owned businesses folded up. Reacting to the incident, Participant 7 from the Ghana National Chamber of Commerce and Industry intimates:



The business community has always challenged suspicious activities of nationals of other countries involved particularly in the retail sector. There have been demonstrations, strikes, court actions and media briefings – all aimed at discouraging such conducts by the Chinese and also to draw the attention of the government to address the issue head-on (September 30, 2023).

The government is equally pressured to make public the Sinohydro deal and publicly assure the nation of a better local content, non-partisan appropriation of the loans and above all, measures for environment-friendly activities in and around the Atewa forest by the coalition of CSOs, the media and local communities in the catchment area (Larnyoh, 2019).

Despite the numerous activities of civil groups, participants categorized Ghana-China relations into two distinct levels: intergovernmental and individual. Some participants believe that given China's global status and hard-power capabilities, Ghana, when exercising its agency, lacks the effectiveness to significantly influence its engagement with China. However, at the individual and informal level, the activities of these groups do impact the actions taken by the state in response to the Chinese presence.

At the individual level, they (civil groups) play critical role in suggesting to government how to go about Chinese activities in Ghana. However, I doubt how they'll be able to do that in our formal relations with China... sometimes ... you just hear that the President is on a state visit to China, and by the time the President comes back, an agreement is signed. (Participant 1, October 15, 2022).

This suggests that African agency is effective in managing Chinese businesses and individuals operating in many African countries, but its role is less significant in the context of international relations with China. However, notably, during the implementation of such agreements, NSAs may challenge any attempt to marginalize the state or its actors and prompt a reaction by the government. Thus, regimes made up of CSOs or individuals can direct and regulate the behavior of states and various NSAs (Bradford 2007).

## Conclusion

Non-state actors constantly encourage the Ghanaian government to act to preserve Ghana's interests and sovereignty and to prevent the deterioration of Ghana-China relations. The case study analysis gives credence to the assertion that NSAs usually provide first-level agencies and prompts government action, NSAs are crucial in exerting agency in Ghana-China relations. The findings hold several implications for Africa and the Ghanaian society in particular. The analysis show that Ghanaians believe typical actions like organizing demonstrations, legal actions against foreign actors and the national government, holding conferences and workshops for sensitization purposes are crucial in the fight for agency in Ghana-China relations (GCR) than just the reportage.

The fact that some NSAs are complicit in the struggle for agency in GCR begs the question of “checks and balance” on one another as well as the government.

The government should take NSAs seriously in its attempt to exert agency in GCR. The drafting of the country's “local content” should necessarily reflect a broad-based consultation including both state and NSAs such as the media, CSOs and local community groupings.

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